

Through the research and writing of our books over the better part of the past three decades, we have had the great pleasure of getting to know some of the world's leading chefs, cookbook authors, restaurateurs, sommeliers, and restaurant critics. Sometimes, real friendships result.

Such is the case with Dennis Ray Wheaton, who was one of our fondest discoveries during our work on our 1998 book DINING OUT, for which we spent a year eating out with restaurant critics across the United States, exploring how they came to and approached their coveted jobs. Dennis shared his ideal background for this position, having won a fellowship to spend his junior year at the University of Texas traveling around the world and living with families in France, India, Japan, and Poland. He left grad school to work for a while as a bookstore manager and photographer before returning to graduate school in sociology at the University of Chicago, where he earned his PhD in 1987. Two years later, he was named the chief dining critic at *Chicago* magazine.

"...Dennis Ray Wheaton was a graduate student pursuing a doctorate in biology when he realized that he hated working in laboratories. He concluded that he'd rather do almost anything else, and virtually did, working as a cab driver, a laborer, and on the quality control staff at Fleischmann's Yeast. But after returning to school to pursue graduate study in sociology, his lifelong love of food eventually became his destiny."

Early on, we were impressed that in the process of reviewing a restaurant whose cuisine was unfamiliar to him, he would studiously get his hands on cookbooks and read and cook his way through them in his home kitchen. We also found him unfailingly generous with his time and his insights and his professional contacts. Dennis introduced us to a University of Chicago graduate student studying the sociology of criticism, whom we also ended up interviewing for DINING OUT, and Dr. Grant Blank has since gone on to become a Survey Research Fellow at Oxford.

"When I came to Chicago, I found that the ethnic restaurants in this city were outstanding. [As a student] I couldn't afford the finer restaurants, so for years, we'd just go out to eat at Mexican and Eastern European and Asian restaurants. It was always just a passion of mine, which is why a friend of mine who was working at the AIWF [American Institute of Wine and Food] at the time said, 'Why don't you write a feature for us?' And a year or so later, I got a call from someone at The New York Times who said, 'We're starting something called At the Nation's Table. Would you write about things from the Midwest?' I said, 'Sure!' If you're going to be a journalist, it's a good place to start, I guess!"

Dennis's humility and professionalism were paramount, and he kept a very low profile to keep from being recognized. On our first meeting with him, we were both jotting notes on his appearance when he admonished us *not* to describe him *anywhere, ever*. For decades, he maintained that anonymity better than many other leading critics.

"Dennis Ray Wheaton's anonymity has been so well-protected throughout his tenure that he has even gotten away with eating at the kitchen tables of two leading Chicago restaurants without being spotted."

We dined out together a number of times in Chicago, including in the opening weeks of Blackbird restaurant and another time when we were in town briefly so Andrew could run the 2002 Chicago Marathon the next day. Dennis thoughtfully offered us two restaurant options:

carbo-loading at an upscale Italian restaurant, or the tasting menu at the newly-renovated Pump Room. We memorably opted for the latter – indulging in multiple courses and even steak and red wine. Dining in such affable company contributed to keeping us all up much later than we'd anticipated, and yet the next morning Andrew still managed to set a new personal best time of 3:23:13!

“Later I got a call from Chicago magazine, asking if I'd be interested in trying my hand at reviewing. Chicago had a crew of four or five who wrote for the dining guide in the back. I thought it sounded like fun, so they told me to go to these three restaurants, write them up, and they'd pay for it,” says Wheaton. “After I did it, I got a call from the secretary of the editor, asking if I could come in for a meeting. I thought, ‘I don't have time for this....’ But I went, and he offered me the job to replace the Kelsons [Chicago's founders] as chief dining critic.”

Dennis thoughtfully wrote the Foreword to our 2003 book THE NEW AMERICAN CHEF, cleverly weaving through it a theme from the film “The Graduate.” During the course of our work on that book, he also introduced us to Stanford University professor Glenn Carroll, and we have the fondest memories of the great conversation that flowed like fondue during our cheese-themed lunch at Artisanal in Manhattan.

Once after returning from a trip to Oaxaca, Dennis gifted us with a brown paper bagful of grasshoppers, known in Mexico as *chapulines*. While we'd memorably asked restaurant critics while researching DINING OUT about the weirdest things they'd ever eaten, we were frankly more interested in writing about their answers (as Dennis's included a meal of blue foods he assisted Mexican cuisine authority Diana Kennedy in preparing at her home in Michoacan) rather than tasting them. But we took the *chapulines* home to New York City. One day soon thereafter, our housekeeper was at work in our kitchen when she let out a blood-curdling shriek....She'd opened the bag, and was shocked to find what turned out to be her beloved childhood snack – so we were more than happy to regift them to her, with our testament of Dennis's recent generosity to us!

Dennis's holiday visit to New York City led us all to dine together on Christmas Eve 2005 at the Times Square institution Carnegie Deli, with his beloved wife Susan and son Daniel in tow. Knowing of Dennis's own love of film, we were charmed by the story of how on a previous visit, Daniel and his young friends had been discussing a new movie so thoughtfully that another table -- entertained and impressed by their conversation -- decided to pick up their check! The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

While we're enormously saddened by Dennis's passing, we're also mournful of the other friendships that his anonymity precluded during his lifetime. He was so knowledgeable, good-humored, and insightful into the cuisines and passions of the city's best chefs, many of whom he admired enormously. We know so many of them would have equally enjoyed getting to know the man behind the byline. We count ourselves as blessed to have had that privilege.

Karen Page and Andrew Dornenburg
Authors, THE FLAVOR BIBLE, WHAT TO DRINK WITH WHAT YOU EAT, CULINARY
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